Of Pandemics and Financial Emergencies

Will We Restructure or Transform the University?

Laura E. Lyons

I write in the midst of planning for a new academic year rendered unrecognizable from any we have previously known by a global pandemic that forced the University of Hawai'i, like many other schools, to deliver "remote instruction" for the final months of the spring semester. While trying to safeguard health and safety, faculty and administrators, including me, struggle to find the mix of face-to-face, hybrid, and online courses that will allow our advanced students to graduate, and encourage our incoming students to remain enrolled, and then stay for the spring semester.

Every day I hear from students and parents unsure of what to do. Will students be able to afford tuition, given their family's changed circumstances? If they don't attend, will rising unemployment prevent them from finding a job? Will they get housing? How can we help the student whose home lacks connectivity, or whose large household gives them little privacy to focus on their online courses? International students—who often pay tuition at higher rates than in-state students, and who, until the past couple of years, most universities viewed as an important market—grapple with changing and confusing guidelines from the Department of Homeland Security. In making their decisions to enter or stay in the US to study, these students must balance their personal health risks with potential deportation.

Overshadowing all of the unknowns for faculty, staff, and students has been an earnest, urgent, but mostly vague discussion of the inevitable budget crisis the pandemic has created. I write also having read the recently posted Agenda and Supporting Materials for the July 16 meeting of the UH Board of Regents, and it appears that the reality of budget cuts is about to get specific. On the Agenda are two approval requests from the BOR Chair, Ben Kudo. One is for a letter asking Governor David Ige to negotiate with public employee unions to defer salary increases and adjustments. The second is Board Resolution 20-3, "Proclaiming an Emergency and Directing Action by the University of Hawai'i Administration in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic."

This resolution authorizes the administration "to utilize whatever means it has" to reduce operating costs, "including but not limited to, reduction-in-force, furloughs, retrenchment, freeze or reduction in remuneration, etc." The University must present a short-term plan for this fiscal year at the BOR's August meeting, and

develop a long-term plan, which may include temporary or permanent closures, reorganizations, and/or mergers of any unit, from a program to a campus. Conveying its urgency to create structural savings, the Board encourages the Administration "to utilize highly expedited processes for developing proposals for change and consulting on them." Urgent responses and consultation, however, are not easily reconciled.

Calls for restructuring have become a commonplace feature of recent budget cycles. Administrators and faculty often suggest that UH has too many four-year campuses and community colleges for our population. Some researchers ask why UH Mānoa needs to teach general education, while instructional faculty often question why researchers paid through general funds are not uniformly required to teach. Implicit in these questions are competing propositions about what the flagship research university in a state-supported system of higher education should be, and for whom. With a student population of just under 18,000, approximately 13,000 of whom are undergraduates, can UH Mānoa afford to see the excellence of our educational and research missions compete, particularly when both depend on state funding, and the Organized Research Units, while generating millions in externally funded grants, nonetheless also depend upon tuition dollars?

I have two related propositions about what the University should prioritize: students and faculty. I write this as someone with administrative experience, but not in an official capacity for the University. But first, can we agree that administrators must cut their own salaries at rates higher than those expected for other public employees? And can we also agree that an across-the-board cut will affect public employees differently, leaving some to face food and housing insecurity?

Proposition One: Any restructuring of the University must not erode undergraduate education, but should, in fact, improve it.

The BOR resolution asks that the long-term plan demonstrate how the University can "help the state recover and serve Hawai'i" while achieving "its diverse statewide mission." It's understandable that the health sciences, engineering, and technology are viewed as essential to that recovery. We are confronting a public health crisis. Producing more healthcare professionals is key to workforce development, and so is the training of data analysts, cybersecurity experts, and teachers. Even before COVID-19, concerns about climate change were fueling our students' sense that they will inherit a planet that might not recover from centuries of extractive industrial practices, driving an uptick in STEM majors as students sought degrees that would allow them to make a difference.

A college education involves the investment of time and money on the part of many. Given the funding that the state puts into the University, we have an obligation to think about our role in diversifying the economy and educating students to contribute to it. At the same time, we must not lose sight of the importance of

educating students broadly to use knowledge creatively and collaboratively, not just to make their own lives better but also to imagine alternative models of success and sustainability for the communities they come from and will enter.

If we think too narrowly in terms of immediate employment, especially for undergraduates, we abdicate our other responsibilities. Public universities do not simply supply labor pools, but ensure that our economic and political structures serve the interests of the public as a whole. The domain-specific expertise employers increasingly expect from college-educated, entry-level employees encroaches upon electives and General Education requirements, which orient students toward a greater good, including what is good for Hawai'i. But few people remain in their first job, and their education should prepare them for all the occupations that follow as well as the changes in life circumstances, both individual and social, they will experience.

The challenges we face require people who can navigate the complex political and social dynamics that accompany public crises, and whose artistic interventions can shift public perceptions. Anthony Fauci's frustration with the Trump administration's failure to heed the warnings and recommendations of public health experts shows us that technical expertise, while essential, is not enough. We need people educated to higher levels of literacy and with critical thinking skills to counter the anti-science, anti-humanistic thinking of climate change deniers and social media campaigns by foreign governments interfering with elections. We also need health officials who understand the ethical dimensions of safeguarding public health. What is the metric by which we measure the return on investment of such an education?

Our island communities need the people our students will become, the skills they will have to solve difficult problems we have yet to foresee, and the knowledge and care they will have for Hawai'i.

Proposition Two: The University is better positioned to work with Hawai'i communities when more of its faculty come from them.

What continues to prevent Hawai'i's people from entering the University, as students or faculty? Education is supposed to allow individuals to transcend their personal circumstances, and it does. But this orientation frequently perpetuates brain drain, explicitly or implicitly making students choose between their communities and their own success. Many students are told their opportunities will be greater if they leave Hawai'i. But what if we imagined an education system that from the outset sought to ensure that each student's personal accomplishments will invigorate their connections and eventual contributions to the people and places they care most about?

Many of our programs—American Studies, Education, English, Ethnic Studies, Law, Music, and Political Science, and more obviously Hawai'inuiākea School of Hawaiian Knowledge—now have faculty who grew up in Hawai'i. But by

their own admission, STEM disciplines have been less successful at diversifying their ranks. Even with the mandate to curtail hiring, diversifying the faculty—and the administration!—must still be prioritized. For the University to succeed, we need more faculty from Hawai'i in every program, more curricula and research focused on our natural, social, and cultural dynamics, and more administrators whose vision is grounded in aloha 'āina.

As I read Jon Osorio's piece, I was struck by how many of his listed former students are now members of the University's faculty and staff. What they and others offer is an engagement with local communities that involves teaching, research, advocacy, and activism. Though not always comfortable or lauded, their presence is transformative. While it is the BOR's mandate to ask how the University can best serve the interests of the State of Hawai'i, these faculty are asking how the University can more explicitly live up to its role as the University of *Hawai'i*? Can these different questions be reconciled to imagine both a university that is responsive and responsible to the people it is charged with serving, and a more just and sustainable future for Hawai'i?

Laura E. Lyons is the Interim Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa and a tenured professor in the Department of English.